

Anti-Jewish “Propaganda” in Brazil under Dutch Occupation

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From 1580 to 1640, Portugal went through a period known as the Iberian Union. During this time, the King of Spain governed Portugal. Due to the establishment of repressive policies by King Felipe II of Spain against Holland, which had recently declared independence from the Spanish crown, the commercial relationship between the Dutch and the Portuguese was damaged. Up to this point, Portugal had depended on Holland’s financial and technical assistance in the refining and trading of its share of Brazilian sugar production. After Felipe II ordered the confiscation of all Dutch ships anchored at port in his dominions across Europe, Africa, Asia, and America, the Dutch West India Company, in an attempt to minimize the losses caused by this crisis, decided to find a way to obtain sugar directly from the northeastern region of Brazil.¹

The Dutch tried to occupy Brazil twice, in 1624 and 1630. They were unsuccessful in their first attempt (Luso-Brazilian troops defeated the Dutch after a year), but in 1630 they succeeded and occupied a large part of northeastern Brazil, where they remained for 24 years.²

At the time of the occupation, Brazil was quite cosmopolitan, with multiple ethnic groups and cultures coexisting. Jews, eager to find a refuge in Brazil, arrived from countries such as Portugal, Spain, Poland, France, and England. They moved to Brazil hoping for freedom. They were eager to find a place to live, a community where neither their place of birth nor their religion would be a reason to marginalize them or treat them as pariahs. Additionally, Jews from Amsterdam already engaged in trade with the Dutch envisioned increased opportunities for financial growth in the newly-conquered

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¹ The Dutch West India Company was an enterprise of Dutch merchants founded in 1602 using both State and private capital. Its purpose was to expand Dutch economic power in America through the conquest of land and the accumulation of capital. The company’s many shareholders provided the financial capital to equip its ships. The company’s fleet and maintenance costs were jointly accounted, and investors received dividends in the form of profit per share based on the overall results of the company, thereby diluting the risks of each individual voyage. It was based on the same model established by the Dutch East India Company that operated in the Orient. Both companies integrated capital, armed force, and decision making power, dividing the risks and the profits in proportion to each individual investment.

² The Dutch conquered the regions of Pernambuco, Maranhão, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraíba, and Sergipe. Some areas were recaptured by Luso-Brazilian defense militias shortly after and others remained under Dutch occupation until 1654.

territories. Soon after they arrived in Pernambuco, the Portuguese-Dutch Jews established a community similar to the Sephardic orthodox community of Amsterdam.

During the 24-year Dutch occupation, Pernambuco experienced an extremely prosperous period, both culturally and materially. The religious tolerance that Holland extended across the northeast of Brazil created an opportunity for scientific research, literary production, and artistic creation to flourish. The Jews engaged in intense intellectual activity under Dutch rule in Brazil and were able to build a synagogue, schools, and welfare agencies.³

Jewish scholars, poets, and writers lived in Dutch Recife. They included the famed calligrapher Yehuda Machabeu and the rabbis Mosseh Rafael d'Aguillar and Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, both of whom wrote treatises in defense of equality among men.

Daniel Levy, also known as Don Miguel de Barrios, a Portuguese from Holland, wrote poems based on the lives of Jews in the Brazilian colony. He dedicated a poem to an esteemed member of the Jewish community of Dutch Recife, Abraham Cohen.⁴

As businessmen, the Jews played an important role in the establishment of new Dutch commercial enterprises in Brazil. This was mainly because the Sephardim, who arrived directly from Amsterdam, were familiar with both the Portuguese and Dutch languages, a fact that made them indispensable.⁵

The directors of the Dutch West India Company indeed had a material interest in favoring religious coexistence, but the cultural diversity of the population in northeastern Brazil did not always result in harmony between Catholics, Protestants, and Jews.

Several documents from this period show that the various ethnic and religious groups did not always live together peacefully. Portuguese and Dutch chroniclers expressed antagonism, particularly against the Jews, their way of life, and their activities.

The historiography of this period frequently stresses the religious tolerance and freedom that the Jews enjoyed in Recife. However, it is important to understand the social reality that caused conflict between Jews, Christians, and Calvinists. "Tolerance" was mandatory according to the Dutch West India Company, but competition among businessmen and merchants led to disagreements.

During this period, Manoel Calado do Salvador, a Catholic friar who belonged to the Congregation of Serra d'Ossa of the Order of Saint Paul, expressed intense antisemitic feelings. In his book, entitled *O Valoroso Lucidero e o Trinfo da Liberdade*, written during the guerrilla war between Luso-Brazilian and Dutch troops (1645-1648), he described the city of Recife as "a true paradise before the arrival of the heretic Jews." He accused the Jews of illicit gains, corruption, and rape, as well as other defamations of character. He wrote that the Jews transformed "Recife into a Sodom and Gomorrah."

Calado attacked Jews and New Christians (*conversos*) in many ways. One of his main accusations was the fact that some New Christians, along with the newly-arrived Jews from Holland, were trying to build a Jewish congregation. Since the New Christians were all baptized, they were deemed Catholic heretics as soon as they returned to Judaism and were circumcised.

³ See Arnald Wiznitar, *Os Judeus no Brasil Colonial*, Ed. Pioneira, Sao Paulo, 1966, pp. 55-67; Charles Boxer, *Os Holandeses no Brasil, 1624-1654*, Sao Paulo, Cia. Editora nacional, 1961.

⁴ Rabino Y. David Weitman, *Bandeirantes Espirituais do Brasil—séc. XVII*, Ed. Mayaano, 2003, pp. 132-297.

⁵ The Jewish community of Amsterdam was formed at the end of the 16th century by Portuguese refugees from the Inquisition.

Calado also condemned the dissimulating character of the New Christians. He wrote that they were betraying Portugal, as many seized the opportunity to return to old Jewish traditions, associating themselves with the Amsterdam Jews to obtain economic advantages.⁶ The Catholic friar made it known that, in his opinion, the New Christians and Jews were getting rich very fast and without effort, becoming sugar mill owners and profiting from the best opportunities in the region.⁷

The Christian merchants accused the Jews and New Christians of greed, with the knowledge that their ability to speak both Dutch and Portuguese helped them in their commercial enterprises.⁸ Friar Calado took advantage of these complaints and transformed his sermons into diatribes against the Jews.⁹

At this point, the old stereotypes and anti-Jewish myths that had existed since medieval times took root in Pernambuco; accusations of corruption and fraud gave Jews a bad reputation that did not correspond to reality.

After 1645, the Luso-Brazilian militia reorganized and began to exercise leadership in the fight to regain control over the Dutch occupiers. In August, a ship laden with cargo belonging to Dutch merchants and three Jews left Itamaracá island for Recife and sunk near Pau Amarelo, a region that had been conquered by the militia. Four merchants were arrested and sent to Bahia. One Jew managed to escape, but the other two Jewish merchants were held and later sentenced to death by hanging. As baptized Christians, they were given the right to receive Christian instruction before being executed. It is at this point that the stigmas of heresy and treason became confused. They were to die for treason to the homeland (collaborating with the Dutch). However, they would also die as Christians. Manuel Calado had been granted the mission to "remove the blindness by which the Jews led their lives." He was overjoyed because, according to him, he was able to confuse the Jews and eventually made them declare themselves to be happy in the belief that their souls would be saved by Jesus who, in his mercy, would take them out of the hell they were living. Of course, in the end, they were both hanged.¹⁰

Over many years, several historians leveled accusations against the Jews as traitors and collaborators with the Dutch. However, by the end of the 1970s, research conducted by Anita Novinsky demonstrated that many New Christians remained loyal to the Portuguese in the war to repossess the territory. There are many examples of such loyalty. Two masters of the sugar works, Diogo Lopes Ulhoa and Diogo da Serra, helped to defend the territory during the Dutch invasion of Bahia by building forts and trenches.

⁶ Some New Christians submitted themselves to circumcision when they returned to Judaism. Among them were Gaspar Francisco do Costa, Baltazar da Fonseca and his son Vasco Fernandes Brandão, and his sons Miguel Rodrigues Mendes, Simão do Vale Fonseca and Simão Drago. See Padre Manuel Calado, *O Valoroso Lucideno e o Triunfo da Liberdade*, Vol. 1, Belo Horizonte, Itatiaia, São Paulo, EDUSP, 1987, p. 101; Wiznitzer, op. cit. n. 3, at p. 51.

⁷ Calado, op. cit. n. 6, at p. 101: "Todavia, depois que os holandeses a ganharam (Recife), (os judeus) haviam tirado o rebuço com que andavam encobertos, e se circuncidaram, e declarara por judeus publicamente, e estes tinham muitas fazendas de raiz na terra, mancomunaram-se uns com os outros, e prevaleceram e se fizeram senhor de engenho ... e apoderando-se do melhor da terra ... se circuncidaram com grande escândalo do povo cristão...."

⁸ Ibid., at p. 117.

⁹ Ibid., at p. 48.

¹⁰ Padre Manuel Calado, *O Valoroso Lucideno e o Triunfo da Liberdade*, Vol. 2, Belo Horizonte, Itatiaia, São Paulo, EDUSP, 1987, pp. 81-83.

Others, such as Domingos Alvarez de Serpa and Matheus Lopes Franco, joined a special commission that was part of the Governor's plan to raise funds for the purpose of recovering Pernambuco from Dutch occupation. Twenty-seven of the 180 donors (15 percent) were New Christians.¹¹

The Dutch West India Company sent Count Maurice of Nassau to Recife in 1636 to govern the new colony. The two Portuguese who received him, João Fernandes Vieira and Gaspar Dias Ferreira, both wanted to establish grounds for coexistence between the local inhabitants and the new conquerors. According to Friar Calado, when the Old Christian João Fernandes Vieira approached Maurice of Nassau, he had the noble intention of guaranteeing the safety of the inhabitants.¹² On the other hand, according to Friar Calado, the New Christian Gaspar Dias Ferreira personified the stereotype of a "traitor Jew," as he was only concerned with his own interests, eager to get rich at the cost of "the inhabitants blood." In Calado's words, he saw in the "friendship with Maurice of Nassau many opportunities to become illegally rich." Calado accused him of embezzling crates of sugar that were to be offered as a gift to the Count by the masters of the sugar works. When judging the characters of João Fernandes Vieira and Gaspar Dias Ferreira, Manuel Calado explicitly took their origins into consideration.¹³ The Jewish collaboration with the Dutch in the conquest of northeastern Brazil is a myth, constructed with the help of Friar Manuel Calado, which was subsequently passed on to future generations by historians.¹⁴

The animosity of the Calvinists toward the Jews was mainly due to commercial competition but always came with an alleged religious pretext. Some Calvinist ideologists that had planned the conquest of northeastern Brazil supported the idea that religion should go together with arms in defense of the land granted by God.¹⁵

Constant complaints by leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church were sent to the Governor of the Dutch West India Company in annual reports. They complained about the "arrogance" of the Jews and their dishonesty in trade. They also expressed concern over the danger of mixed marriages between Jews and Christians.¹⁶

As a result of these complaints and pressure from the Calvinist clergy under Maurice of Nassau's government, the two synagogues in Recife were closed for a short period.¹⁷ They were only given permission to reopen after the Jews promised not to carry out any rituals that could be considered too "noisy," such as the religious celebrations of *Simchat Torah* and *Purim*.¹⁸

¹¹ Anita Novinsky, *A Historical Bias: The New Christians Contribution to the Dutch Invaders of Brazil (17 Century)*, Fifth World Congress of Jewish Studies, 1972, pp. 141-154.

¹² João Fernandes Vieira subsequently became a leader of the resistance against the Dutch occupation.

¹³ Calado, op. cit. n. 6, at p. 102.

¹⁴ The main accusation that Calado makes about the Jews is that they were traitors to the homeland. Ibid., at pp. 48 and 51.

¹⁵ José Antônio Gonsalves de Melo, *Gente da Nação*, Ed. Massangana, Recife, 1996, p. 205.

¹⁶ Hermann Waetjen, "A Igreja no Brasil Holandês" (The Church in Dutch Brazil), in *O Domínio Colonial holandês no Brasil* (The Dutch Colonial Domination in Brazil), Rio de Janeiro, CEN, 1938, pp. 350-353.

¹⁷ The synagogues remained closed from January 5 to January 10, 1638.

¹⁸ During the celebration of *Simchat Torah* and *Purim*, Jews sing and dance with joy. See Wiznitzer, op. cit. n. 3, at pp 64-65.

A report sent to the Dutch West India Company in 1641 accused the Jews of dominating the sugar trade and professing their faith in public places. The Protestant clergy and the Christian merchants both requested in their reports that Jews should be prohibited from participating in auctions and becoming civil servants or tax-collectors.¹⁹

Demands for further ostracism of the Jews were made on a continuous basis. The Protestant clergy often cited the restrictions imposed upon Jews in other countries, such as the requirement to wear a badge on their clothes, or a red hat, or a yellow insignia on their chest to identify them, in order to prevent them from cheating or robbing Christians. Perhaps the most anti-Jewish complaint of all can be found in the following words:

everyone knew of the methods used by the sons of Judah, who lied, fooled, and used false means that made competition difficult for Christians who do not resort to such treachery. ... Because of their usury practices towards farmers, they are a true plague in Brazilian lands. Brazil belongs to Christians and not the damned sons and daughters of Israel who desecrate the name of Jesus. The Israelites are not needed here; Christians are able to do what they do!²⁰

The Dutch West India Company regarded the Jews who came from Amsterdam as important political allies, given its interest in intensifying the import and export trade. In addition, the company could not take any drastic action against them, such as agreeing to the request to exclude them from the retail business, due to the influence of its Jewish shareholders. Therefore, the only measures that were taken included prohibiting the construction of a new synagogue and imposing economic restrictions, such as the rule that two-thirds of brokers had to be Christians.

Maurice of Nassau became aware of the growing conflict. He advocated religious freedom for all inhabitants in the belief that tolerance could only benefit the Dutch government. He believed that taking a hard line against religious groups would only increase the chances of a revolt. Calvinist ministers, however, pressured him into issuing statements that were unfavorable toward Jews.²¹

The tolerance that Maurice of Nassau manifested was deeply appreciated by the Jewish community. In 1642, knowing that the Count had to return to Amsterdam, Jewish representatives offered him a sum of money for each year that he prolonged his term of office so that he would remain as governor in Brazil.

The concerns of the Jewish leadership in Amsterdam were borne out by the fact that a Calvinist Synod was established in Recife in 1642 by bishops from the Reformed Church. The Synod had executive and deliberative power over all matters related to the internal organization and moral behavior of the population of Dutch Brazil. They advised the government authorities to use coercive or punitive measures in those cases judged to be scandalous and deserving of censorship or punishment. Judgment and punishment were regulated by a civil court at the request of the civil or religious authorities.²²

¹⁹ Ibid., at p. 64. The sugar mills (*engenhos*) that had been left behind by the Luso-Brazilians during the conquest of the land by the Dutch were auctioned off. At these auctions, it was possible to acquire a sugar mill at a price below its market value.

²⁰ Waetjen, op. cit. n. 16, at pp. 350-353.

²¹ Wiznitzer, op. cit. n. 3, at p. 66.

²² João Henrique Santos, "A Inquisição Calvinista — O Sínodo do Brasil e os judeus no Brasil Holandês" (The Calvinist Inquisition — The Synod and the Jews in Dutch Brazil), in Angelo Faria de Assis, Nara M. C. Santana and Ronaldo S.P. Alves (eds.), *Desvelando o Poder — Histórias de Estado*,

The Synod's main concerns regarding moral behavior centered on five issues: the marital situation of couples living in concubinage; prostitution; concerns relating to invocations, blasphemies, heresies, and apostasies; transgression of the Sabbath by Jews and slaves; and freedom of religion for Jews and Catholics.

Notwithstanding the installation of the Synod in Brazil in 1642, the Class Assemblies—the name given to the meetings between the Dutch colonial government and the representatives of the Reformed Church—had discussed issues related to the Jews since 1637. Repeated criticism arose in these meetings over the freedom of Jewish worship, the “scandalous” Jewish religious practices, and the unfair competition in business dealings.

In the same year that the Synod was created in Pernambuco, a new set of regulations was created for all Jews. Under these regulations, Jewish men would have been prohibited from marrying Christian women and children of mixed marriages in which the mother was Jewish would have been raised by Christian parents. However, the leaders of the Jewish community spoke to the directors of the Dutch West India Company and the resolutions of the Synod were never put into practice.²³

Trials against Jews were rare. The only known case was of a Jewish woman in Paraíba, part of the territory occupied by the Dutch, who was accused of “sacrilege,” in that she had spoken out against the name of “our Savior Jesus Christ and the Holy Baptism.” The Synod concluded that the case was not serious and that the woman showed promise of being converted, as she had started to attend church frequently.²⁴

A ferocious anti-Jewish attack came from a Calvinist bishop named Vicente Joaquim Soler, who rendered services to the Dutch West India Company. In several letters, he accused the Jews of “sucking the blood of the people,” “stealing the Company,” and benefiting from “privileges that hurt Christian merchants.”²⁵ These letters also reveal the Calvinists' deep concerns over the increase of the Jewish population. With the continuous influx of Jews from Holland and the increase in their birth rate, they could have become the majority group in the region.²⁶

The reconversion of many New Christians to Judaism also raised concerns in anti-Jewish circles. In 1641, an *Escolteto* (a post combining the duties of a district attorney and a police officer) by the name of Paulo Antônio Daems requested that Gaspar Francisco da Costa, a rich New Christian, be banned from trading and his assets confiscated because he had reconverted to Judaism and submitted himself to circumcision.²⁷

Among the various demonstrations of antisemitism in Pernambuco, there is the case of a Jew, accused of blasphemy, who was tortured and killed by a mob inflamed by the speeches of priests. The Jewish community of Amsterdam, always aware of what was

Religião e Sociedade (Power Revelation—Stories about the State, Religion, and Society), Ed. Vício de Leitura, Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, 2007, pp. 107-124.

²³ Ibid., at p. 121.

²⁴ Wiznitzer, op. cit. n. 3, at p. 55.

²⁵ *Brasil Holandês: Dezesete cartas de Vicente Joaquim Soler* (Dutch Brazil: Seventeen Letters of Joaquim Soler), Ed. Index, Rio de Janeiro, 1999.

²⁶ On February 5, 1638, two ships—*De Soutcas* and *Graeuw Paert*—arrived in Recife from Amsterdam with 200 Jews, led by Manuel Mendes de Crasto (Manuel Nehemias), on board. See José Antônio Gonsalves de Melo, *Gente da Nação*, Ed. Massangana, Recife, 1996, p. 223.

²⁷ Daems' duties were of an executive nature, and he also appointed judges. For several years, he was also general secretary of the government of Maurice of Nassau, having demonstrated on many occasions his aversion toward the Jewish people.

going on in Brazil, reacted with indignation and accused the Dutch government of Recife of supporting the persecution of Jews. They also complained that the *Escabinos* (lay members of a mixed court) of Mauricia should have let this case be tried by the Council of Justice, as they did in Holland for cases of blasphemy. They argued that the *Escabinos* lacked standing to judge this matter.²⁸

Several attempts were made to prevent Jews from practicing their religion freely. However, when the Ecclesiastic Council of the Calvinists decided that the two synagogues should be closed again, the Jewish community of Recife contacted the Council of the Elders (*Sanhedrin*) in Amsterdam, who wrote a petition in 1645 to request that no distinction be made between Jews and Christians in the Dutch colonies. In reply to this petition, a document entitled *Patente Honrosa* (Honorable Patent) was addressed to the Supreme Council of Brazil and the Governor. As a result, both synagogues remained open, and the Jews were able to continue their religious practices.²⁹

Antisemitism flourished vigorously in the economic realm. Several episodes reveal that competition and business disagreements led to discrimination against the Jews. Moisés Abendana, a sugar trader who had debts with several Dutch creditors (amounting to 12 florins), was found hanged under mysterious circumstances. The authorities concluded that he had committed suicide. The Council chamber of the *Escabinos*, led by *Escollto* Daems, forbade his burial and determined that his body be displayed hanging as an example of the dishonesty of the Jews. The Jewish community leaders of Recife went to Governor Maurice of Nassau to defend the honor of Abendana, claiming that he was a victim of murder. In an attempt to avoid humiliation, they offered to pay Abendana's debt plus a bonus for the inconvenience created by the incident. When the Governor declined their offer, they went directly to the creditors. On receiving the money, the creditors allowed the burial to take place.³⁰

The Portuguese continually tried to reconquer the lost territory, and in 1645 the Luso-Brazilians organized an insurrection. The Dutch reinforced their defenses while simultaneously becoming stricter in religious matters. Jews were accused of not respecting the Sabbath by working and opening their schools. Christians began to insult Jews in the street.³¹

The period of the Dutch occupation of Brazil in the 17th century was one of the few times when Jewish life flourished at this time in history. However, it only lasted for a short period, and it cannot be said that it was entirely free of anti-Jewish feeling. In 1654, when the Dutch were forced to leave Brazil, the relative freedom of the Jews ended.³² The Jews left with the Dutch, only to experience new difficulties in the Caribbean and back in Amsterdam.

²⁸ de Melo, op. cit. n. 26, at p. 269. The Council of the *Escabinos* was a chamber of magistrates, the position of judge was an elected office, and any person was eligible. The chamber was presided over by an *Escollto*.

²⁹ de Melo, op. cit. n. 26, at p. 254.

³⁰ Wiznitzer, op. cit. n. 3, at p. 76; Santos, op. cit. n. 22, at pp. 120-122.

³¹ de Melo, op. cit. n. 26, at p. 305.

³² In 1648, the Dutch experienced the beginning of their defeat in Brazil, when their territories were reduced to the shores of Pernambuco. A big battle in proximity to Recife, in Guararapes, marked the end of the Dutch occupation in Brazil. At the beginning of 1654, the war between Dutch and Portuguese troops ended with a capitulation agreement according to which the Dutch would have three months to leave the area. See Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, Vol. 1, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1970, p. 209.

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